Idaho Fish and Game's

Mule Deer Update

Vol. 1, Issue 2

Helping Landowners Help Wildlife

Did you know that Fish and Game can help landowners improve the long-term productivity of their CRP lands while helping wildlife? The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is a federally funded farm program designed to protect highly erosive soils. With Fish and Game's help, these lands can be enhanced to provide forage and cover for a variety of wildlife species, including mule deer.

Fish and Game can provide cost sharing, technical assistance, or contract work on a variety of CRP improvement efforts, including interseeding and native shrub planting. Fish and Game can even provide no-till drills, shrub planters, augers, and other equipment needed to manage your own project!

If you are interested in learning more about how Fish and Game can help you make your CRP lands better for you and wildlife, ask your nearest Fish and Game office for their latest brochure, "Wildlife Friendly CRP".

Setting Big Game Seasons

Kelton Hatch, Regional Conservation Educator, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, Magic Valley Region

Setting seasons for deer, elk and antelope is a complicated job that takes several months, but it also takes several years of data in order to come up with the final recommendations each season.

Helicopters are an important tool biologists use to determine the number of deer in an area. IDFG

Wildlife biologists have collected population information on big game animals since the '30s, and historically relied on ground counts with help from federal agencies and sportsmen. Because much of Idaho is difficult and inefficient to access on foot, biologists began using airplanes and helicopters in the '40's. Reliance on these modern day machines became greater during the '70s, and the current methodology was developed during the '80s and '90s.

Obviously, when biologists count big game herds from the air they do not see all the animals. The vegetation, snow cover, activity and the group size of animals all influence the number of animals biologists see from the air. Research has resulted in sight ability models that correct for this visibility bias.

Elk sight ability surveys are conducted in each management unit every three to five years. Biologists estimate the total number of elk in the area. Conservation officers and biologists also do on the ground surveys every year in many hunting units to monitor cow to calf ratios or reproductive performance.

For deer, biologists have selected areas that represent the general deer population in a given area and counts are conducted every year - these areas are called trend areas.

Prior to antler drop, biologists do composition counts on mule deer. This helps them determine the buck to doe and fawn to doe ratios. Every spring they do green-up counts within the trend areas. This count helps them determine the estimated number of deer that survived the winter.

Demands for aerial survey dollars are greatest for deer and elk, leaving little for other species including pronghorn. Because harvest levels for pronghorn are set very conservatively, precise population information isn't required. Fish and Game relies on ground surveys in select areas to monitor pronghorn populations.

"This gives us a general picture on what the population is doing,"

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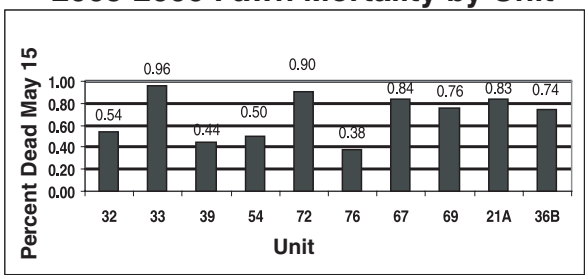
MDI Coordinator's Report

Toby Boudreau, MDI Coordinator, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, Southeast Region

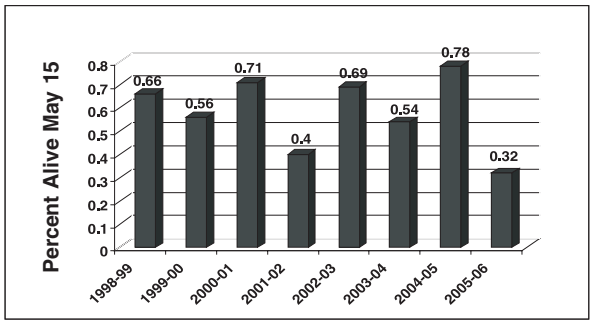
The statewide mule deer hunter survey is coming together and should be out to the public by late this fall. These surveys will be sent to a random sample of mule deer hunters throughout the state. The objective of the survey is to measure mule deer hunter attitudes and opinions on a variety of mule deer issues. The results of this survey will be used to revise the statewide mule deer management plan. The goal of the revision of the mule deer management plan is to help us better manage the mule deer populations for the deer hunters of Idaho.

Many of you have read or heard reports of this year's poor fawn survival based on our fawn mortality monitoring program. In reality the results of the fawn mortality study were not all bad, however they were variable from 4% to 70% survival. The statewide average survival was 32%. It is important to keep in mind that the statewide fawn survival over the previous 3 years was 69% in 2002-2003, 54% in 2003-2004 and 78% in 2004- 2005. Adult survival over this past winter was much higher than with fawns, based on our radio-collared sample of does. We will continue to annually conduct fawn monitoring projects throughout the state to assess the effects of winter on mule deer populations.

2005-2006 Fawn Mortality by Unit



Statewide Fawn Survival 1998-2006



I want to thank all the volunteers who helped with Mule Deer Initiative (MDI) projects this year. Volunteers are the reason we are able to achieve all of the great projects. These volunteer community efforts help us to improve mule deer habitat, while raising public awareness of wildlife and wildlife habitat and increasing the public ownership of the resource. Thanks!

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said Randy Smith, Fish and Game Regional Wildlife Manager in the Magic Valley.

"When you combine all the information from the various counts it gives us a pretty good picture of what is going on with big game populations," he said. "These surveys allow us to determine herd trends, monitor reproductive performance and collect information on seasonal distribution."

But these counts are only one part of the formula biologists use to set seasons. Three other parts of the equation include, harvest data, the winter fawn monitoring program and public input.

Harvest information is a very important piece of the puzzle and the mandatory harvest report card is just a new addition to the process. This new card replaces the telephone survey that was used for years.

"The harvest report card provides us with very important information on harvest levels and hunter success," said Smith. "Additional information collected at check stations helps us gauge hunter satisfaction, monitor animal condition and collect data on age structure and antler size.

The winter fawn-monitoring program is also key in helping biologists monitor deer population trends and determine reasons or causes for the trends.

For the past eight years the Fish and Game has been radio collaring an average of 250 fawns, 25 fawns in 10 different areas across southern Idaho. The monitoring helps biologist determine winter survival of the youngest animals in the herd.

This year's results have shown a wide range of survival. The range was between 4% and 70% with an average survival of 32% statewide. This year's survival is the lowest fawn survival measured since the fawn monitoring study began in 1998. There are several probable reasons for the highly variable and lower overall survival. The first reason is that although we had a wet spring last year much of the southern half of Idaho had a very dry fall, this reduced the nutritional value of the habitat at a time in the fawn's life when putting on body reserves to survive over winter is crucial. The second

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High School Kids Starting the "Ground Work" for Improved Mule Deer Habitat

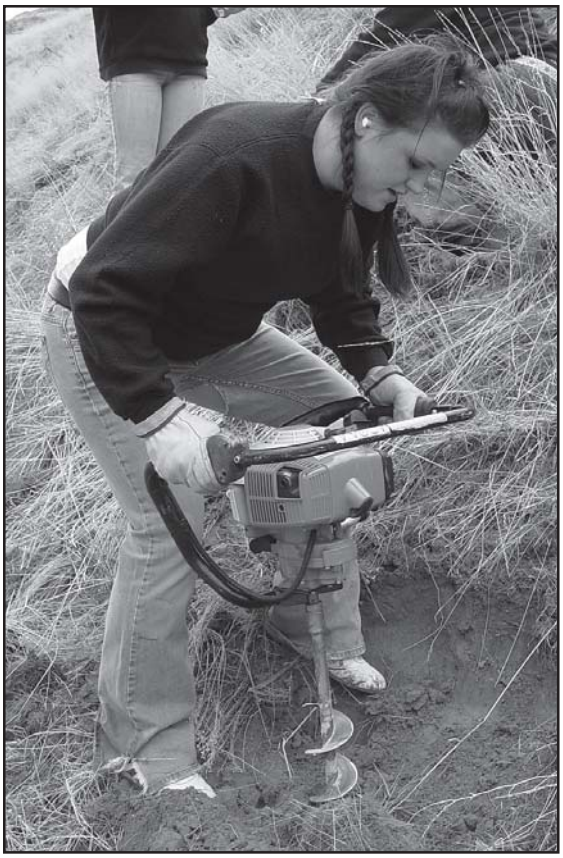
By Jennifer Jackson, Regional Conservation Educator, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, Southeast Region.

Achieving the goals of Idaho's Mule Deer Initiative (MDI) wouldn't be possible for Fish and Game without the help of some very important partners— teenagers. For the past few years, students from area high schools in the southern, southeastern, and Upper Snake Regions of Idaho have been donating numerous hours to improve habitat for mule deer.

This past March, high school students from the Magic Valley area began working with Fish and Game biologists to plant bitterbrush and other native shrubs in wintering areas crucial to mule deer. The initial effort actually started last fall when students from eleven Magic Valley high schools along with students from College of Southern Idaho (CSI) potted thousands of small bitterbrush plants in greenhouses. Through the winter months, a total of 8,000 bitter brush plants were raised by high school and CSI green-thumbs until they achieved one-gallon size and were ready to go in the ground.

This past spring, those hand-reared plants along with 32,000 other bitter brush, 2,000 mountain mahogany, 2,000 four-winged salt bush, and 2,500 silver sage were placed in the ground in the Magic Valley area by Fish and Game staff, students, various youth groups, volunteers, Fish and Game reservists, and sportsmen's groups like Deer Hunters of Idaho and Mule Deer Foundation.

Planting projects like those in Magic Valley are also essential to MDI efforts in southeast Idaho. In that part of the state, students from Century, Pocatello, and Highland high schools as well as high school students from Rockland laid down their pencils to pick up augers and hand tools for bitter brush and sagebrush planting projects this Spring. With the added help of various volunteer groups, Monsanto, and private landowners, close to 41,000 bitterbrush, 6,500 four-wing saltbush, 3600 Hobble Creek sage, and 600 sulfer-flowered buckwheat plants were planted in southeast Idaho this past spring.



Lauren Kensel, 16, a junior at Pocatello High School uses an auger to drill a hole for a bitterbrush plant on a slope in Blackrock Canyon, Pocatello. IDFG

Chris Sherrod, 18, a senior at Century High School in Pocatello, uses a scraper to prepare a new home for a bitter brush plant in Blackrock Canyon, Pocatello. IDFG

In the Upper Snake region, over 44,000 bitterbrush plants and almost 4,000 big sagebrush plants went in the ground at the hands of invaluable volunteers and sportsmen groups. Additional plants are biding time in greenhouses at area schools until this fall when they will be ready for planting.

Sarah Potter, 17, a senior at Century High School in Pocatello, said during her bitterbrush planting experience at Blackrock Canyon last April, "I feel really privileged to be out here. It is an awesome opportunity to plant these plants, knowing they will grow and help the earth [and wildlife], and it is also a way to give back to the community."

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major reason for lower fawn survival was the winter itself; the snow was deep in many areas and temperatures were below normal in many units. These factors combined lead to fawns using up the little reserves they had earlier in the winter, causing them to be nutritionally stressed. As a result, most died of malnutrition or were easy prey for predators. Radio-collared adult mule deer survival was much higher than that of fawns.

Once information has been gathered from its various sources, biologists try to fit all the pieces together, looking for trends in data that reflect the status and health of the big game herds. This information is then presented to the public at big game scoping meetings held each spring. At these meetings, sportsmen are asked their opinions about what types of hunting experiences they would like.

"We understand how many animals we need to harvest or not harvest to reach established management goals, but we need hunters to tell us how they want us to get there," said Smith.

All of the input gathered at scoping meetings is complied so biologists can determine the general consensus of the sportsmen. This is a complicated task with many hunters offering different ideas.

The final step is to pass the information on to the Fish and Game Commissioners. They are the people that have the final say on what the next year's hunting seasons will be.

Mule Deer Initiative
Mule Deer for the Future

For more information about the Mule Deer Initiative, contact Toby Boudreau at (208) 232-4703 or visit the Fish and Game website at http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/mdi/. For questions on this newsletter, please contact Jennifer Jackson at (208) 232-4703.